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ABSTRACT

Issues related to basic skills education are discussed, beginning with a review of recent trends in American education. The 1960's are characterized as a decade of innovation, while the 1970's are described in terms of interest in accountability and cost effectiveness. Several reasons for current concerns about basic skills are suggested: parents' expectations; industry's interest in the school's role in job training; a general emphasis on measurable quantities; and public reluctance to pay higher taxes. Classroom teachers are said to face a growing array of obstacles which seriously thwart their professional mission; many new policies contribute to the erosion of the individual teacher's autonomy. A variety of quoted sources indicates that there is little agreement on which skills are considered basic: definitions range from the three R's--reading, writing, and arithmetic--to ethics, coping skills, and self concept. Several news items illustrate the fact that literacy data may be misleading. (GDC)

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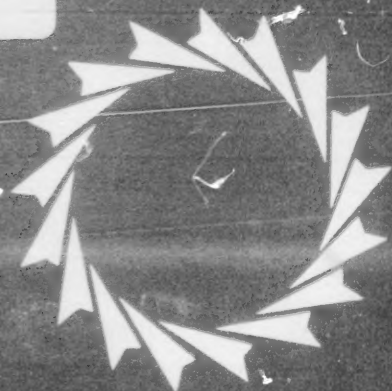
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Back to the Basics?

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But the teacher, as Plato's dialogues illustrate so beautifully, must do more than simply start where his students are; he must also take them somewhere else. To do that, he must have some convictions about where they should go, convictions, that is to say, about what is worth learning.

Charles Silberman
Crisis in the Classroom

INTRODUCTION

There is no question about the need for basic skills that are essential to the development of an educated person. There are, however, some questions about what these skills should include, how best to teach them, and how to determine if they have been learned.

Such questions are seminal. When they are discussed in any detail, related questions soon become apparent. For example, how great is the present need to improve education in the basics? Should the federal government finance efforts in all public schools to teach basic skills more effectively? If it should, then how will the results of such a program be measured? Should there be national standards? Should the basics be the same for all students?

Everyone in the teaching profession agrees that all students must have an equal opportunity to develop, within the limits of their ability, the fundamental skills to handle language, numbers, and other complex ideas. There is also agreement within the profession that such basic skills are only a first step, but an essential first step, toward an education. An educated person has much more than the rather limited abilities necessary to cope and to survive.

Even more fundamental questions come to mind as we probe other aspects of the basic skills dilemma. Just what do we mean today by an educated person? In the Land of the Free, is an education, like a driver's permit, a right or a privilege--to be given or earned? And finally, can the teaching profession's goal of professional excellence survive in a society willing to legislate minimum competence for its young? "Excellence implies more than competence," said John W. Gardner. "It implies a striving for the highest standards in

every phase of life....The idea for which this nation stands will not survive if the highest goal free men can set themselves is an amiable mediocrity." (9)

For classroom teachers such questions as excellence and equality are often lost in school systems that are organized and administered in ways that are counterproductive to all that is known about human learning. One purpose of this paper will be to consider some of these limitations to learning in relation to basic skills.

Present public interest in what is usually called the back-to-the-basics movement has reached epidemic proportions, and it has frequently become the occasion for attacks on schools and teachers, who, it is alleged, are not teaching the basics. Recurring attacks on public schools are, of course, a part of American life, and the present outcry to go back to the basics has reached a dimension not equalled since 1957 when Russia beat us into space with Sputnik I.

In those early days of the Space Age nearly a generation ago, the reason for this early Russian triumph was clear enough to critics of education: The schools were not teaching the basics. A shocked and humbled America then embarked on what one observer called "a bitter orgy of pedagogical soul-searching" since "many of our graduates could barely understand a page of English prose, much less compose one." (13) It was a mass reaction of national guilt; and the press, Congress, and some citizen groups blamed the schools for our lagging space program. "What Went Wrong With U.S. Schools?" and "Why Are We Less Educated Than Fifty Years Ago?" were theme questions for lengthy pieces in U.S. News & World Report (June 7, 1957, and January 24, 1958).

In many ways these attacks on the schools 20 years ago were out of all proportion to the relative importance of the Soviet space achieve-

ment. But it was a time for reaction in America. As happens after every war--and the Korean War had ended--we were experiencing a period of neoconservatism. Not unlike today, a New Right was calling for a return to the good old days as if somehow a new generation could solve its problems by going back to the basics in politics, in religion, in labor relations, in economics, and in education. Since 1957, of course, we have had spectacular success in space, and our schools have received small credit for that.

Without question the most tangible and enduring result of this public debate about schools was the National Defense Education Act of 1958 which, among other things, quickly doubled the budget for the U. S. Office of Education and began a new era of federal support for education. Although this landmark legislation had been drafted by the Eisenhower Administration prior to Sputnik, its chance of becoming law was not a political reality until Sputnik evoked a Great Debate about the quality of American education--and only then after the bill was renamed to assure Congress that its purpose was, after all, for national defense.

Were the Soviet schools really better than ours? The question could be answered neither simply nor to everyone's satisfaction. After all, the two countries had rather different forms of government. The U.S.S.R. national goals, economic systems, and concepts of individual rights were clearly antithetical to those of the U.S.A. The most pragmatic answer to this question came from James Bryant Conant, a former president of Harvard who in 1957 was the first U.S. Ambassador to the Federal Republic of Germany. The Russian space success, observed Conant, was not so much that Soviet schools were better than ours; it was simply that their Germans were smarter than our Germans.

The 1960's became a time for educational innovation as federal interest and support increased. One index of this growth can be seen in federal grants for educational purposes, which grew from \$1.7 billion in 1960 to \$8 billion in 1969. During this decade the schools became a crazy quilt of new programs as the U. S. Office of Education became a bureaucratic conduit for federal funds to support such diverse innovations as new math, language laboratories, teaching machines, and instructional television. Behaviorism became the name of the game and classroom teachers, by and large, were considered a part of the problem. Federal funds were used to develop instructional packages, some of them guaranteed to be "teacher proof."

Since the 1960's federal programs and support have not slackened, and educational grants for 1977 are estimated at \$17 billion. At the same time, the courts and a growing number of federal agencies have produced a confusion of categorical program regulations for the schools. A recent study (6) reports that school districts receiving educational funds are caught between conflicting directives because federal programs are responses to a variety of often conflicting values. Many classroom teachers view the results of all this as a curriculum kaleidoscope, with emphasis on just about everything but basic skills. Clearly, such developments are an important reason for the NEA's present strong position in favor of a Department of Education and of general, rather than categorical, federal support of education.

In retrospect, most innovations of the sixties have had small lasting effect on educational practice. In most cases, however, these innovations have each added something to the curriculum, which continues to grow. And it may well be that a curriculum bloated with

innovative leftovers is itself an obstacle for some teachers who would like to spend more time on basic skills. This "additive" approach to curriculum development--often by legislative mandate--is well known to teachers. The results of all this can be seen in school programs in driver education, drug education, alcohol education, tobacco education, metric education, sex (and sexism) education, family education, human relations and ethnic education, energy education, consumer education, environmental education, and career education.

Such programs have recently been supplemented by a major federal effort to educate all handicapped children--many of them in the regular classroom. Although such programs are morally sound and clearly in the public interest, they are seldom funded with any kind of realistic understanding of what they will cost, or what they will divert from other (e.g., basic skills) school programs.

More recently the Office of Education has supported studies by RAND and other think tanks to determine what went wrong with the innovations of the sixties--or, as one congressman put it, "how to get more bang for the educational buck." The answer is in, and it is quite simple: Classroom teachers were not involved in planning, they were not provided with proper in-service preparation, and as a result they understood neither the projects nor what was expected of them as key participants in the projects.

This point has been made by others. In a soul-searching evaluation of its relatively modest (\$30 million) efforts at educational innovation from 1960 to 1970, the Ford Foundation reported: "Without systematic teacher preparation, use of new curricula and equipment tends to be superficial, sporadic, and ephemeral, ignoring

the potential for significant improvement in the teaching-learning process." (1) The report concludes that teachers, students, parents, and community must be part of any process for serious rethinking about school functions.

This truism has been lost today on some state lawmakers who are concerned about basic skills, who seem to feel that literacy can be legislated, and who are willing to single out teachers as scapegoats for the social, economic, and political problems of the day.

From Innovations to Accountability

The 1960's decade was one of innovation in education, and the 1970's will most likely be remembered as the Decade of Accountability in education. For the classroom teacher the 1960's decade was a time of surprises, often when school opened in the fall--new books, new experts, new math, and new electronic gadgets. The school library, historically a reading center, became first a media center and later a technology center.

The classroom climate of the 1970's is not the same. It has been characterized by some teachers as a time for endless hours (often of their own personal time) of writing behavioral objectives. Certainly the present era is reflected by a sign on the wall of a teacher lounge: "Accountability can be dangerous to your professional health (and tenure) if you have too many slow learners."

In March of 1970 President Nixon set the tone for the new decade in a message to Congress: "Education for the 1970's: Renewal and Reform." He made it perfectly clear that schools should be held accountable for their performance. One initial result of this presidential message was a series of federally sponsored efforts at social

experimentation in selected school districts across the country--all of it under the rubric of educational accountability. During the first few years of the seventies, millions of dollars in federal education funds were spent on such schemes as performance contracting with private industry to run schools, vouchers for parents, and the use in schools of a range of business-management gimmicks such as program budgeting, systems analysis, and management by objectives.

Early in the 1970's state after state began to enact a unique kind of legislation known as educational accountability acts. Their purpose was clear enough: to make schools and teachers accountable for the quality of educational programs. In practice these laws mandated the wrong tests for the wrong reasons. In an effort to encourage this phenomenon, and to keep track of its many provincial manifestations, the U. S. Office of Education established the Cooperative Accountability Project (CAP) in 1972. CAP, in turn, established SEAR --the State Educational Accountability Repository--to "disseminate accountability information to state education agencies." In 1975 SEAR contained over 1,500 documents.

CAP and SEAR were phased out in 1976, and since then "minimum competence" has replaced the term "accountability" to describe a growing number of such state laws. Public interest in basic skills today has added new legislative impetus to these state programs. By and large, however, state minimum competency laws and programs retain many of the undesirable aspects of earlier accountability legislation. Teachers are still being held accountable for the performance of their students on standardized tests and for other educational results over which the teachers have no control.

During the Decade of Accountability the united teaching profes-

sion has worked aggressively at local, state, and national levels to protect teachers and to call attention to the wrongheaded features of such programs. Michigan was one of the first states to impose an "accountability system" on its public schools. Not only did the Michigan State Department of Education attempt to use student test scores as the major criterion to evaluate classroom teachers, it also withheld funds from schools because of low test scores. This high-handed government interference called for an investigation, and in 1972 the Michigan Education Association and the National Education Association took action in what was clearly the public interest.

A blue-ribbon panel of nationally recognized authorities was established with complete autonomy to evaluate the educational soundness and utility for Michigan of the Michigan Accountability Model, with a particular focus on the assessment component. The resulting statewide study attracted much attention and included private interviews and public hearings. The final report of the panel (11) led to significant changes for the better in Michigan's state accountability program.

"Test results are not good measures of what is taught in school," the panel said. The Michigan report went on to indicate that "unless one teaches the tests themselves, they are not very sensitive to school learning." As for the state education department's practice of tying test results to school funding, the panel condemned the practice as "whimsical" and "harmful."

In the spring of 1978 a similar statewide accountability study was made in Florida. (18) An independent evaluation panel under contract to the Florida Teaching Profession-NEA and the National Education Association took a strong position against the "detrimental" and

"demoralizing" use of standardized tests. Such testing, according to the panel, has sacrificed children who are black and poor on the altar of accountability. The study also found that the statewide competency testing program in Florida's high schools caused an overemphasis on elementary reading and arithmetic and "resulted in neglect of high school subjects such as science, literature, music, and the arts."

The back-to-the-basics movement, and its manifestations in state after state in the form of minimum competency laws, is where we are today: an extension of the Nixonian approach to better schools. Will this be the closing chapter in the Decade of Accountability?

And what of the future? Will the next decade be the Orwellian 1980's for American education?

A purpose of this paper is to relate present public concern about basic skills to some of the underlying causes, both within the school system and within the society which supports and controls that system. The back-to-the-basics issues cannot be limited to pedagogical practice. We already know how to teach just about anything to just about anyone. Nor can the issue be contained within the larger educational community--an unbelievably complex and pluralistic bureaucracy with theoretical and topical support from every known field of study.

Today the problem of basic skills and some of the related questions already noted have become a social issue, an economic issue, a racial issue, a political issue, a legal issue, and finally, a philosophical issue about the purposes of education. It will be useful, therefore, to consider the problem of basic skills in a number of contexts.

Those functions of government that touch nearly everyone--for example, the postal service, tax collection, and public schools--receive a great deal of critical public attention in a democracy. There are, in each realm, horror stories about an occasional letter that has been lost or delivered very late, a millionaire who has paid no income tax, or a high school graduate who has been deemed illiterate.

Such exceptions to the rule are often considered as news by reporters who must fill space between ads in the print media and provide words and pictures for the noncommercial segments of the broadcast media. In the world of corporate journalism, where bad news is good news and good news is bad news, stories with depth and substance are increasingly replaced with the flip and the flippant, gossip and fun.

This is not to say that letter carriers, tax collectors, and teachers are without malfeasance and above public scrutiny. Nor is it an effort to pan news reporters who, like teachers, are often the victims of managerial forces over which they have no control. The analogy may, however, serve as a useful wedge to uncover the hidden agendas that prompt some of the more vocal and perennial critics of public education.

The quality of public education has always been a matter of concern for several groups. Parents have historically seen the school as a place where their children could make something of themselves, a democratic channel for upward mobility. Some still do. More recently, however, changes in family structure, in adult values and goals, and in employment opportunities for youth have all tended to erode this view of the school. Most parents today have spent more time going to school and are better educated than were their own parents. As a consequence, they now have more leisure time and wider interests.

Some of them are more articulate and expect more from the schools their children attend.

At the same time, an increasing number of other parents are indifferent to such things. This growing disenchantment with education by parents is not lost on the young. Parent apathy, in fact, has been identified by teachers today as a major problem for them in teaching basic skills, or in teaching just about anything.

Others with a continuing interest in public education include employers, many of whom expect from the schools a yearly crop of young people with salable skills. For over a century industrial societies have seen the school as a means of preparing and pre-sorting youngsters to meet the varied and increasingly specialized needs of an expanding economy. As the productivity of the American economy increased, it became apparent--apparent, at least, to dominant business interests--that a major function of the rather new public schools would be to teach people how to earn a living in such a society. The business of America was business, and the business of its educational system reflected that fact. It was a time of quantitative values; measurement was easy, big was best, more was moral. Major efforts were made to reduce human excellence to a series of numbers. What couldn't be measured "didn't count."

Although it began in an earlier and simpler time, much of this overemphasis on job training as the primary purpose of education can still be found in some schools and in some parts of the business community. Certainly it is reflected today in the misuse of standardized test scores for premature tracking of students into dead-end jobs, and in a range of efforts to substitute work in the world of work for study in school--and to give high school credit for the former. It

may also account for what some have described as "The Curriculum of Despair," with its courses in "learning to cope" or simply "survival." Minimum competence, indeed.

Taxpayers are yet another group with a continuing interest in public education. Often well organized, articulate, and politically effective, this group includes a good many parents as well as representatives from business and industry who are drawn together by a common fiscal bond. Local taxpayer groups often form temporary alliances of convenience with other organizations to defeat bond issues or to elect sympathetic school board members. The success of these efforts can be seen in the fact that 79 percent of the 2,041 public school bond elections in 1964-65 were passed. In 1974-75, only 46 percent of such elections were approved out of a total of 929. Recently, more serious manifestations of a taxpayer revolt have become apparent.

Historically, taxpayers have been a dominant force in shaping--some would say "limiting"--the quality and amount of public education. They also get credit for a brand of limited and conservative thinking, often thought but seldom expressed, that a major purpose of the school is custodial, i.e., socialized babysitting and youth warehousing.

This group and the two groups just mentioned--parents and the business community--are changing today at a time when each must operate in a larger context of change. One result of all this can be seen in new and mutually supportive alliances between groups that heretofore have had little in common. For example, the idea of local property tax as the sine qua non of school support is increasingly open to question, and for good reason. Other educational issues which are now forcing political realignments include the role of the federal govern-

ment, national standards and curriculums, the assessment of educational quality, and the goals and purposes of education.

Some Policy Issues

As we have already noted in this paper, such issues as evaluation, public expectations, student performance standards, in-service education, and the purposes of education are integral to a better understanding of the current interest in basic skills. And they point up the need for educational policy. The question of basic skills has also been briefly considered on the preceding pages in relation to larger social, political, and economic perspectives. What all of this means to classroom teachers is that they must often proceed with their work in a policy vacuum, often as whipping boys (persons) for every special interest group in town.

As a result, classroom teachers face a growing array of very real obstacles which prevent or seriously thwart their professional mission.

The "scapegoat approach" of dumping all manner of social problems in the classroom. The "Band-Aid approach" to curriculum development. The "big brother approach" to monitoring categorical funds. The "accountability approach" of blaming teachers for just about everything. All are examples of a growing erosion of individual autonomy within the teaching profession. There are many more examples, institutional and otherwise, and nearly all of them are beyond the control of individual teachers.

Vigorous and united action, based on solid information, will help a good many teachers. At the same time--and perhaps more important in the long run--it will call public attention to the need for some hard thinking about the more basic policy questions that opened this paper.

Three groups outside of the teaching profession, each with a special interest in public education, were described earlier: parents, employers, and taxpayers. At various times, in various places, and for various reasons, such groups have become heavily involved in the politics of education. Since Sputnik the united teaching profession has changed more than anything else in American education, and today it has become a significant political force.

With this newfound power the profession is now in a much stronger position "to influence developing public policies on education." (16) This is both a complex and a politically difficult responsibility for those who must lead and govern the world's largest and most democratic professional union.

It is a complex responsibility because recent educational policy in the United States has been developed largely by default. More often than not what passes for policy is an inconsistent amalgam of court decisions, taxpayer revolts, congressional action (or inaction), federal regulations, special-interest groups, and bad research. Such complexity is further compounded by national traditions of political fluidity and social diversity in an economy of continuing technological change.

It is a politically difficult responsibility since public education remains a state and local responsibility. Diversity and pluralism are not educational policies, although they are often used as substitutes for policy or as excuses for no policy. Local school board members and state legislators, many of whom would not recognize an educational policy if they saw one, often have more immediate political concerns. Policy statements, after all, can become very dangerous things for politicians--after they have been elected.

The effect of the absence of policy was discussed in 1958 by Robert Oppenheimer: "There is a widespread impression that we live from astonishment to surprise, and from surprise to astonishment, never adequately forewarned or forearmed, and, more often than not, choosing between evils, when forethought and foreaction might have provided happier alternatives." (17)

What is educational policy?

The need for thoughtful attention to this question is illustrated by the popular--and vastly oversimplified--issue of going back to the basics. There are, of course, other issues: education for all handicapped children, classroom discipline, class size, and in-service education, for example. However, an analysis of almost any classroom problem today will lead us back to the same kinds of fundamental questions. What are instructional imperatives?

Shall we go back? Or shall we go forward? The difference between "conservative" and "liberal"--people, parties, policies, or whatever--is the difference in how much faith one has in the past and how much faith one has in the future.

Nothing is more reactionary in its consequences than the effort to live according to the ideas, principles, customs, habits, or institutions which at some time in the past represented a change for the better but which in the present constitute factors in the problems confronting us....New problems demand for their intelligent solution the projection of new purposes, new ends in view; and new ends necessitate the development of new means and methods. (5)

This quote is from John Dewey's last published essay (1952) on education. Although Dewey was spared the educational fiasco of Sputnik, his words contain some support for those who do not want to go back to the basics. They also seem an appropriate bridge between

this introduction and what follows it.

A final linkage in this introduction has to do with student rights, another policy question not unrelated to basic skills. Students, as every teacher knows, vary in ability, motivation, speed, and temperament. This, of course, is the reason why some students do not learn "the basics" as well or as soon as other students.

Some of these otherwise normal students will qualify as "learning disabled" under PL 94-142--the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. Late in 1977 supplementary federal regulations for PL 94-142 were issued "for the evaluation of children suspected of having a specific learning disability." In 3,500 words of bureaucratic jargon we are told, among other things, that the determination of a learning disability "is made based on whether a child does not achieve commensurate with his or her age and ability when provided with appropriate educational experiences...."

If learning basic skills is to be an individual right for all students, then those who need special treatment must have it. This raises questions about dollars and children. At what point, for example, are the basics cost-effective?

WHAT ARE THE BASICS?

Clearly there is a lack of public agreement on just what are "the basics." The most recent Annual Survey of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools by the Gallup Poll and the Charles Kettering Foundation asked the question, "Do you favor or oppose the [back-to-the-basics] movement?" Of those who responded, 83 percent were in favor, 11 percent were opposed, and 6 percent gave no answer.

Some respondents to the poll said they considered "the basics" to be simply reading, writing, and arithmetic. However, a substantial number said that to them "basics" were such traditional values as respect for teachers, good manners, obedience, proper dress (whatever that may be), and a return to "structured classrooms" and to "the old ways of teaching."

It would seem, then, that some parents want "basic skills" while other parents want "basic behavior." More than likely, many want both. This lack of agreement about what are the basics is not limited to parents and the general public.

The slogan "back to the basics" has no more meaning in education than it would have in any other field, according to 300 elementary school teachers in a March 1978 open letter to President Carter. Their statement was an outgrowth of the National Conference on Language Arts in the Elementary School held last spring in Indianapolis, and it is typical of reactions from within the profession to the current emphasis on basics.

"What is basic in education," stated the open letter, "is meeting the need for all people in society to learn to the fullest extent of their needs, desires, and capabilities." Drafted by Kenneth Good-

man of the University of Arizona, the letter also points out that "testing has become the Frankenstein monster of contemporary American education, largely through federal guidelines. ...Ironically, the state of the art of language testing is such that it makes bad programs look good and good programs look ineffective...."

Earlier this year in Washington, Kenneth Clark opened a series of public seminars on Education in America sponsored by the U. S. Office of Education. When asked about basics, Clark said that the basics are what schools are for and that beyond the three R's the basics should include respect for law and an understanding of and sensitivity to others, as well as humaneness. Clark also had some observations about the misuse of standardized tests, which he said should be used only for diagnostic purposes. This point, of course, is not unrelated to other concerns about basics, since in some states "the basics" have been defined solely by the standardized tests that are commercially available and, according to their vendors, will do the job.

There seems to be no end to the question of what should be basic in education for the last quarter of the twentieth century. "I'm for basics," says James L. Jarrett (12), "assuming, of course, that you agree with me on what they are." According to Jarrett, "The trouble is that the word [basics] seems to mean too little, sometimes too much. It means too little if the implication is that the schools... should teach nothing but the three R's...."

The question of what is more basic than the basics has been raised by a number of educators, including Edward J. Meade, Jr., of the Ford Foundation. With the resources available to us, Meade sees universal literacy as only a matter of public and national resolve and

priority. But beyond literacy, he feels that such "basics" as honesty and trust are even more essential for society in general. Caring for others, according to Meade, is the most important basic of all:

Even if without the ingredient of caring for others the so-called "back to basics" movement was successful, it would be a hollow victory. For children to achieve a basic literacy in reading, writing, computing and thinking without our demonstrating our care for them as persons and instilling in them the desire and ability to care for others is hardly progress in civilization. (14)

Although Meade's concept of caring will strike some today as a fresh and necessary goal--a basic--it is as old as the idea of formal schooling. In fact, the major purpose of education in the early days of our Republic was salvation, which in a secular sense meant moral and ethical training. The fact that it is now necessary to resurrect such "basics" as honesty, trust, and caring is in itself a comment on the moral climate of today--in and out of the classroom.

We confuse verbal behavior with all behavior, moral and otherwise. This has led to some of the confusion over what are the basics. "A child who does not learn the 3R's in school is unlikely to learn them anywhere else," says Arthur W. Foshay. (8) "This obvious fact," observes Foshay, "has led many people to conclude that education in the 3R's is the sole, main, most important function of school. Such people consider the 3R's basic, which of course they are, and also sufficient, which of course they are not." Foshay feels that the three R's do not offer an adequate base for living a life; nor are they the only unique offerings in school.

Foshay, a respected and longtime student of curriculum, has pointed out four curricular areas which he considers to be equally important and equally basic:

1. Coping skills, which include the three R's but which also include such skills as social interaction and emotional growth. Emphasis on skill development, according to Foshay, tends to inhibit understanding, i.e., "know-why."
2. Character, which involves ethics--a knowledge and a disposition to act on a distinction between right and wrong. It involves self-direction, dependability, honest dealings, and a clear sense of justice.
3. Citizenship, which is of the essence in public education--and Foshay points out that this has always been so. It is individual action based on a feeling of affiliation with the nation.
4. Private realization. Anyone who is wholly defined by the opinions of others is doomed to have no personal sense of worth. "By private realization," says Foshay, "I refer to that complex of understandings, attitudes, and perceptions that make up my assertion that I am. I am, apart from others and their beliefs about me. I know myself incompletely, but more fully than others know me."

Among his four curriculum basics, Foshay's "private realization" is rather new as an educational concern. It is also an important concern. When the present alienation of students (and parents, and taxpayers, et al.) is considered, it may well be that more attention in school must be given to the personal integrity, the feeling of self-worth, of every student. In a society given to growth and competition, where learning is sometimes confused with test-passing, a growing num-

ber of youngsters are able to find peer approval--a kind of pseudo-self-esteem, at best--only through violence.

"Private realization," according to Foshay, "requires that all... aspects of what it is to be a human being be attended to by all the persons and institutions that influence the child." In this regard, Foshay finds much in the present back-to-the-basics movement that is counterproductive:

The vision of a school we all share is of a place full of life, where people act with purpose on their own. The present "back to basics" movement in its narrow focus on a few of the coping skills, moves us away from such an ideal. What we need is a recognition of what is, in fact, basic to gaining an education and living a life.

As for citizenship education, it now seems to be in a decline. Early this year the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) released a study of Changes in Political Knowledge and Attitudes among teenagers from 1969 to 1976. The findings are mixed, but declines are reported in knowledge of the structure and function of government as well as in "understanding and willingness to participate in the political process." Educators quoted in the NAEP release say that these findings require "prompt and drastic attention by the public and educators alike...to preserve our system of government"; and one of them suggested that citizenship should be added to the three R's as an equally important basic skill.

Others took a different view of the NAEP findings and said that the present overemphasis on the three R's was in fact the reason for the decline in teenagers' knowledge of politics and citizenship. In this camp a number of educators saw the NAEP study as once again demonstrating the inherent perils of the back-to-the-basics movement. Gordon Cawelti, executive director of the Association for Supervision

and Curriculum Development, was quoted in the press on this matter: "If we persist in narrowing the focus of school curriculum to include or emphasize only such skills as reading, writing, and math we should expect to see further declines in student knowledge of other skills equally essential, such as citizenship and political knowledge." (4)

Another point of view on the NAEP discovery that teenagers do not understand government was expressed by Howard D. Mehlinger (15), director of the Social Studies Development Center at Indiana University: Parents' attitudes toward government are affecting the young. According to Mehlinger, the NAEP findings were anticipated by a Lewis Harris poll that showed adult confidence in the executive branch of the federal government slipping from 41 percent in 1966 to 23 percent in 1977. During this same period adult confidence in the U. S. Congress fell from 47 percent to 17 percent.

"Schools alone are not to blame for the falling test scores reported by NAEP," said Mehlinger. "If American parents hold such attitudes, can we be surprised that their children show indifference to political affairs?" Related to this is Mehlinger's observation that citizenship education has no powerful lobby demanding its improvement and that, as a result, it has dropped out of style during the past two decades.

How basic is citizenship? The question is difficult to answer because of a crowded curriculum. Mehlinger's comment on this will be of particular interest to teachers:

The schools are among the most burdened institutions in American society. As various interest groups compete for time and space in the classroom, decisions are made as often in response to political and monetary pressures as they are in response to the needs of society and the students.

Just one example of this curriculum overload will illustrate the heights, or the depths, to which the problem can go. In one school, the research guide for English and the social studies says:

"In the 10th grade, study is concentrated on the growth of democracy, and especially on the form of government which developed. Such a study should be brief and to the point in order to allow time for the unit on driver education."

Skills and Frills

Any attempt to answer the question of what are the basics (and how to go back to them) must give some attention to the political realities of declining enrollments and fiscal austerity caused by a general taxpayer revolt. In this context, "back-to-the-basics" is an empty slogan--a code word for cutting school budgets. It is a more immediate and a far more disconcerting issue than a public debate about educational goals and curriculum.

Fred M. Hechinger (10) raises this issue in the February/March 1978 NEA journal, Today's Education. He points out that those who simply want to cut school budgets have joined forces--under the banner of basics--with conservatives (both political and educational). Back-to-the-basics becomes a demand for "cutting out the frills" when these two groups work together, says Hechinger, who sees this as both a revolt against high property taxes and an effort to support the puritanical view of education. In such a context, the first "frills" to go are usually music and art.

The fallacy of this tendency, according to Hechinger, is that "the stripped-down, no-frills basic curriculum allows for too little transfer of skills to other areas--creative, artistic, or just plain interesting. The harm that can be done to the three R's by the

elimination of school newspapers or other extracurricular activities that require basic skills should be evident to everyone concerned."

Hechinger and other informed commentators agree that basic skills are basic and essential starting points for an educated person. They also agree that parents, too, have a responsibility for such skill development in their children. In his NEA article Hechinger puts it this way:

Any successful new emphasis on the basic skills--and liberals as well as conservatives should demand such emphasis--ought to begin with an analysis of the major causes of contemporary deficiencies in these skills. Some of the contributing factors, such as lack of stress on the printed word, cannot be corrected by the schools alone. The parent who cannot or will not read to a child at an early age as part of the daily intellectual diet takes the first step in undermining that child's foundation in the basic skills. So does the parent who uses television as a pacifier, without helping to create the links between viewing, reading, and thinking.

Hechinger is a member of the Editorial Board of the New York Times, and the piece quoted above, from Today's Education, had an obvious influence on a first-rate editorial in that newspaper on April 12, 1978. It was called "Rewards and Risks of 'Back to Basics,'" and it said, in part, that "the United States is not so poor that the only way it can reform the teaching of basic skills is to teach nothing else."

The question of defining the basics of American education is a policy issue of the highest order for the teaching profession and for the future of our country. The question is not a simple one and, as we have seen, there is little agreement about how it should be answered. Ben Brodinsky (2) has reported on a prestigious conference last year which brought together 40 national leaders in education to examine

the state of basic skills in American education. After three days of erudite papers, high-level discussion, and spirited debate, the conference ended on a final note from one of its sponsors, James G. Cook, president of the Thomas Alva Edison Foundation. Cook, according to Brodinsky, had been a hardliner on basics throughout the meeting, where he espoused the conservative views of the business community and stressed the importance of the three R's. But Cook had been moved to view the basics from new angles before the conference ended, and this was his valedictory:

My notion of the basics assumes that our schooling system should be concerned with literacy in words and numbers. It also acknowledges that our educational system will be moving toward another set of basics: truth, beauty, justice, love, and faith. Character-rooted passions are required for the survival of a democracy. We want children to be not only competent but also compassionate; in Dag Hammarskjöld's words, "to become truer, kinder, gentler, warmer, quieter, humbler, so that they can become firmer, stronger, and wiser."

THE BASIC SKILLS AND UNIVERSAL LITERACY

The preceding section of this paper raised the question of what are the basics in education. In the present section, it should be noted that "the basics" are limited to the basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic, the so-called three R's. As stated earlier, there is complete agreement about the need for these fundamental skills.

The question of how well the three R's are being taught today must be considered first in relation to a more basic question: To whom? The New York Times editorial (cited on page 24) addresses this question with eloquence: "For the first time in American history, teachers are being asked to educate all children, including many who in the past would simply have been allowed to drop by the wayside." In 1920, only one of every five teenagers in the United States went to high school. At the start of this decade, more than 92 percent of our teenagers were in high school.

As our goal of universal, free education comes closer to reality, it brings with it changes in the student body. And some of these changes, incidentally, account for most of the declines in scores on group standardized tests. For some, who would like to go back to the basics (and to the good old days), the elitism of the past has much appeal. There is, of course, much more to be said in favor of the greater democracy of the present.

"Many of the nation's present difficulties arise from its past successes," said John Cogley. (3) "We are in trouble today not because the democratic system has failed but in large part because it has succeeded in breaking down the class, religious, and racial

barriers of the past, thereby creating expectations unknown to earlier generations." Anyone who would like to better understand what the press calls "declining test scores" will be interested in this excerpt from Cogley's essay:

An increasingly more democratic society cannot enjoy the tranquility and high cultural level that were available to American society when it was managed by and largely for, a ruling elite. The more democratic the common denominator, the lower it is likely to be. This is a fact of life in present-day America. It has to be taken account of by educators, politicians, journalists, broadcasters, and everyone else appealing to the public. Inevitably, it does not sit well with those who once enjoyed the benefits of elitism and remain haunted by the memory of a time when only the privileged had to be considered and standards could be set high for that favored few.

Test Scores as News

As we have already noted, the problem of reporting test scores from a large and pluralistic student population is difficult. (Most of the tests, of course, are a waste of time and money, but that is another story and beyond the scope of this paper.) With disturbing frequency, editors responsible for reporting such test results to the public in understandable terms are interested in sensationalism, bad news, and sweeping generalities.

Recently the major news stories about testing have been based on news releases and press conferences generated by NAEP, the U. S. Office of Education, the Educational Testing Service, or similar groups. The releases sometimes include a great deal of technical test data. They are written as news stories by the sponsoring agency and handed out or mailed to reporters. At a good news conference good reporters ask good questions and get good answers. What most local newspapers and broadcasters get from all this is a story "on

the wire" from the Associated Press, United Press International, or some other wire service.

Before we consider an actual wire story on testing in some detail, it will be useful to point out another aspect of the wire service tradition of American journalism. Such stories are written in the "inverted pyramid" style with the most important, essential facts in descending order of importance, with the least significant information at the end. If a story is to be cut, the local editor starts cutting at the bottom of the story. When space is very short, readers get only the lead paragraph which, in theory, will give them the essential facts.

Here is a recent example of how an important story on testing was handled under this system. On the morning of June 26, 1978, the NAEP held a press conference in Washington to announce the results of its recent assessment of science knowledge among 72,000 elementary and secondary school pupils. At 2:44 that afternoon the Associated Press put on the wire a 16-paragraph story with the following lead:

Washington (AP)--In the decade since America landed men on the moon, knowledge of science has declined steadily among the nation's 17-year-olds, a government survey shows.

Just another test story about what a bad job the schools are doing. Not quite. For those few readers whose papers ran all the story and who were persistent enough to read the first 14 paragraphs, there was an interesting qualification (contradiction, if you will) near the end:

The tests found that, in general, certain groups tended to perform above the national level. These were boys, whites, those with at least one parent who went to college and those living in the Northeast, big-city suburbs or well-to-do urban areas.

This was followed in the AP story by paragraph No. 15, which is quoted below to add another dimension of meaning not in the lead:

Those generally below the national level were girls, blacks, those whose parents did not graduate from high school and students in the Southeast, big cities, or poor urban areas.

This kind of information, buried in paragraphs 14 and 15 in a 16-paragraph story, gives much new meaning to the first paragraph in the story. Does the "lead" mislead readers? Since there is almost no national testing as such, the journalistic tendency to spot national trends in testing stories usually overshadows the far more significant regional, ethnic, and socioeconomic data that are necessary for a reasonable public understanding of such stories. This kind of reporting would also expose some of the limitations of such tests.

There is, of course, good news about test results today, but it is seldom "played up" (to use a newspaper term). One example of this can be seen in a UPI story of April 14, 1978, from Indianapolis: "Today's public school children are better readers than their parents were 30 years ago...." It was a brief story of six paragraphs.

Illiteracy

The term "functional literate"--like "the basics"--is badly used and widely misunderstood; yet it is considered by the public as the cutoff point for those who have not learned the three R's. Despite the oft-quoted estimate that the illiteracy rate in the United States has dropped from 11.3 percent to 1.2 percent since 1900, there is a great disagreement among experts, and just about everybody else, about what it means to be "literate" or "illiterate" and the degree to which each condition is "functional."

This almost ludicrous confusion about the meaning of functional literacy (or illiteracy) is illustrated in an excellent survey of research by Donald L. Fisher (7). He quotes an Educational Testing Service study which found that "14 percent of the adult population at the professional-management level were functional illiterates." Fisher concludes "that the functional literacy label has been applied inappropriately to individuals in the professional-managerial class." Even if a significant proportion of this class has difficulty reading, the problem has not held them back. Their "illiteracy" does not hinder their successful functioning.

The ETS measurement of illiteracy is typical of such studies where the literacy or illiteracy rate is simply a function of the percentage of the population that can be expected to give a correct or an incorrect response to a test item. "As an absolute measure of illiteracy rates," observes Fisher, "such a procedure is not easily interpretable." It is also clear, he says, "that the methods used to estimate the number of illiterates are biased in the direction of overestimation."

Fisher estimates that in any report of literacy based on test evidence "between 5 and 11 percent of any population or group are misclassified." Taking this into consideration, says Fisher, "we found that it was possible to infer that few if any functional illiterates were actually awarded high school diplomas."

Fisher's survey of research on measuring literacy is competent, comprehensive, and complex. Supported and published by the National Institute of Education, much of it is written in the technical jargon of research. It is not easy to read. But it obviously represents a point of view that has not had much attention in the press. In the

abstract of his study (p. vii), Fisher comments on his findings about the effectiveness of schools today:

The survey results have precipitated a rash of concerns. The first sections of this paper analyze the legitimacy of these concerns and the accusations which have evolved....Two accusations stand foremost. First, high schools have been accused of graduating thousands, even millions of illiterates. At first glance, this claim is supported by numerous surveys and observations. For example, the surveys referred to in this paper report that anywhere between 2 and 13 percent of the population with a twelfth grade education are functionally illiterate. We will argue that the upper estimate is greatly inflated, and more often than not misinterpreted. In general, we see no solid basis for the first accusation in any of the surveys of functional literacy administered to date. In fact, the evidence from the surveys points in just the opposite direction.

The second accusation centers on the effectiveness of today's schools. The schools of today are accused of being less effective than the schools of yesterday. Individuals or groups who level this accusation believe that education in general has deteriorated. Some claim that the value of a secondary education has decreased. Others place the blame on primary education. An analysis of the survey data does not support these claims.

Such surveys of educational research provide a better understanding of how well the three R's are being taught today. They also illuminate the amount of misunderstanding of what it means to be literate in today's world.

CONCLUSION

There is good reason to believe that much of the present public clamor for schools to get back to the basics has less to do with the three R's than with other, not so visible agendas for public education. One example of this is the neoconservative New Right, a mixture of taxpayer groups, fundamentalists, and a few unreconstructed racists who want to cut school budgets and preserve the socioeconomic status quo. Despite their extreme position, such groups are gathering support for their efforts to limit the role of education as a change agent in society.

Another less extreme but even more pervasive trend is the effort, on the part of many groups, to solve the social, political, and economic problems of the larger society by dumping them on the schools. This "curriculum lobby" is responsible for much in today's course of study that is anything but basic. One reason for the more or less uncontrolled curriculum expansion is the lack of educational policy and clearly stated goals and purposes of education.

This is not to say that the curriculum should be frozen and that the basics of yesterday will solve the problems today's students must face as adults in the year 2000. It may well be, as Foshay suggests, that today's students will need something more than the hard, easily measured academic subjects. When one considers the present school problems of discipline and violence, the idea of developing in students stronger feelings of self-worth and self-identity may be the most fundamental of educational basics.

Beyond the fundamental skills of the three R's, there is little agreement about what should be basic in education. And this lack of

agreement seems to be as widespread within the profession as it is in the public domain. What some people consider skills, others consider frills. Some consider student deportment, dress, and attitude to be a basic. Others are of the opinion that the arts and humanities are also basic, and that they are necessary to provide the motivation, substance, and interest necessary for students to learn the three R's. Language, after all, is not very important for those who have nothing to say, and addition is a bleak exercise for those who have nothing to add.

The public and its lawmakers do not have a balanced view of the facts about literacy and such basic skills as the three R's. Although it is easy to blame the news media for this state of affairs, there are more fundamental causes. After all, both the press and the schools reflect the society in which they exist. This lack of public understanding, of course, is a major reason for efforts in state after state to legislate literacy in terms of minimum competency laws. Well intentioned as it may be, most of this legislative effort simply compounds the problems presented in this paper.

It is impossible to isolate the present back-to-the-basics movement from a great many other issues facing teachers. There is little agreement, for example, on what is basic, and even less on what an educated person should know. Yet in this context, classroom teachers must proceed each day in a climate charged with conflicting public expectations for both excellence and equality. Like such goals as universal public health and equal justice for all, the idea of a free and universal educational system with equal opportunity for everyone is something yet to be achieved. Although it is something we cannot go back to, it may be our most important basic.

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